

Understanding the Rise of Religion in China

Guest Editor's Introduction

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Analysis of the rise of China tends to focus on China's extraordinary economic growth and its impact on the existing order. Little attention has been paid to the religious dimension of China's rise as a global power. For centuries, Western intellectuals held that China is a country without religion, as Voltaire (1962: 170) once stated, "the religion of the men of letters of China is admirable. No superstitions, no absurd legends, none of those dogmas which insult reason and nature." But this is no longer true.

After years of untapped potential, China has been emerging as a religious powerhouse to be reckoned with. Take Christianity as an example. There were approximately 700,000 Christians when the People's Republic China was established in 1949; in 1982, the number slowly but steadily increased to 2.2 million. The next three decades witnessed the emergence of Christianity in China. There were arguably 70 million Christians in 2007 (Stark, Johnson, and Mencken 2011), which means that Christianity has grown at an average of around 15 percent annually, an incredible growth rate, much faster than China's annual economic growth at around 10 percent. But Christians are not the only ones who enjoy prosperity: the majority of Chinese devote themselves to popular religion. Around 100–200 million Chinese are self-claimed Buddhist followers; there are more Muslims in China than in all of Europe; and various new and foreign religions aim at occupying the largest religious market in the world.

Why have religions become more and more influential in China? The articles in this issue attempt to answer this question in different ways. The authors are social scientists as well as experts on specific religions in China: Zhe Ji on Buddhism, Nanlai Cao on Protestantism, Yang Der-Ruey on Daoism, Shun-hing Chan on Catholicism, and David A. Palmer on new religious movements. I will describe the nature of the contributions to this issue and in doing so, shed light on some factors accounting for the religious revival in China: the relaxation of state regulation, social anomie, and organizational adaptation.

The Relaxation of State Regulation

The growth of religion has partly benefited from the relaxation of restrictions on religion and the increasing religious freedom. Some restrictions on religions result from state regulation, while others from social hostility. A recent report indicates that China has a high-level of government restrictions on religion but in the low range at the social level (Pew Forum 2009). Indeed, if scholars rely on the religious policy documents to discuss China's church-state relationship, they will conclude that religious freedom is heavily restricted because the state has issued various restrictive circulars and ordinances to reduce the influence of religion. However, Chan's article, "Changing Church-State Relations in Contemporary China," proposes that "these studies are biased and limited because the documents on religious policies reflect only what is stated on paper for the official record. They do not suggest or capture government officials' motivations for implementing certain religious policies or their actual behavior when doing so."

Based on ethnographic data collected in Fengxiang diocese, Shanxi province, Chan delineates a complex picture of China's local church-state relationship, stressing two salient characters. One is the flexibility of policy implementation. The officials were not as stubborn as some scholars imagined; they were flexible and selective in implementing controversial and restrictive religious policies, negotiating with religious leaders and believers, and being ready to compromise. The other is what can be called "cooperative resistance." Chan finds that while priests resist unpopular policies, they cooperate with the officials on matters in accordance with their faith.

Yang Der-Ruey's article on Daoism also reflects that the church-state relationship in China is much more complex than the religious policies stated on paper. Local governments have gotten actively involved in reviving traditional religious sites as a way of stimulating tourism. In the case of Wudu City, officials have invested a large amount of money and time to rebuild the Watergate Mazu Temple as a cultural heritage; this image-building project finally became a part of the city's Eleventh Five-Year Social Economic Development Plan. It is by no means unique in China that local governments play supportive rather than repressive roles in reviving local faiths. Of course, the purpose is to develop the local economy. Or, in Yang's word, it is a "business."

If Chan and Yang reveal that government restrictions have become relaxed, Palmer's article on Bahá'í shows that social restrictions on new faiths are at a relatively low level in China. It is hard for Mormons to do missionary work in Israel or Indonesia because of local hostility, but it is easier for them to gain converts in China where people are open to all religions. In a sense, China is a promised land for religions, although the state only recognizes the legal status of five religions: Buddhism, Daoism, Protestantism, Catholicism, and Islam. As Palmer notes, some foreign religions, including Bahá'í, the Latter Day Saints, Russian Orthodoxy, and Judaism, have accumulated a certain degree of legitimacy and tolerance from the government of mainland China. At the social level, they enjoy even more accep-

tance. The improved religious freedom undoubtedly benefits from the spread of these foreign religions in China.

Social Anomie

Sociologists usually regard the renewal of religions as a response to social anomie, and that is applicable to China. The country has experienced dramatic economic and social changes in the past three decades, moving out of a preindustrial rural economy and into a manufacturing-based economy. With the process of industrialization and urbanization, a large number of people have moved from rural areas to the suburbs and to the cities. Life in urban areas is quite different, characterized by uncertainty, disorder, and loneliness. For those who continue living in rural areas, most of whom are female and either young or old, life is tough and they have to deal with various difficulties such as poverty, pollution, and isolation. Against this background, the attraction of religion is tremendous: it not only builds bridges for isolated people, but also brings order and hope to them.

Zhe Ji's article, "Chinese Buddhism as a Social Force," points out that Buddhists have become more enthusiastic about social ministries. When lay Buddhists become rich, they donate money to Buddhist monasteries. The increased wealth permits Buddhists to engage in various kinds of social services. Buddhists respond actively to natural disasters such as earthquakes, establish schools in rural areas, and set up philanthropic enterprises. "Among the thirty-one provincial Buddhist associations, at least seventeen have established related charities or foundations." Although these programs are usually responding to demands made by the government, which wants to enlist the religious sector in coping with welfare problems, they are helpful in building a positive image of Buddhism and thus facilitating the recruitment of new converts.

In Cao's article, "Elite Christianity and Spiritual Nationalism," we find that the growth of Protestantism is associated with the urbanization of Wenzhou, one of the richest and most Christianized cities in China. According to Cao, "Wenzhou's recent Christian revival has benefitted from the city's political marginality and a mission-derived local faith tradition as well as a vibrant household economy." He also notices that Christianity plays a transformative role in this rapidly urbanizing area by means of "linking up with the Western track, displaying national identity, acquiring official recognition fulfilling moral duty, displaying elite masculinity, seeking cultural legitimacy, and gaining access to social resources and networks." It seems that religions have become important social forces compensating for the loss of community and social norms caused by the dramatic social transition.

Organizational Adaption

In the 1950s, the state established several associations to supervise five recognized religions. Theoretically, every religious organization and individual should be af-

filiated with one of these associations, which were administered by the Bureau of Religious Affairs. In practice, however, religious organizations beyond the control of state-sponsored associations (Protestant house churches, underground Catholic communities, unregistered folk religious temples, qigong organizations, and new religions) have emerged all over the country.

How could these “illegal” religious groups survive and proliferate in China? The answer lies partly at the level of organizational innovation. Palmer’s article argues that the state is very cautious with regard to the size of religious groups. If a church is very large and its leaders refuse to subdivide it, it will undoubtedly result in repression, as what happened in the case of the Shouwang Church. But if the participants of a congregation are limited, the officials tolerate it. As a result, some religions, such as Bahá’í, adopt shrewd strategies to avoid suppression by means of operating in small groups. Bahá’í believers devote themselves to grass-roots training and community building under the principle of horizontal multiplication and division. When a Bahá’í group reaches twenty participants, they divide. Such a principle is helpful in deflecting the state’s attention; it also facilitates the intimacy of the believers. Since the size of the congregation is small, all believers interact with each other frequently. In addition, they are “required to consult, plan, and work together with people of vastly different backgrounds.” It is important to note that Bahá’í is not the only religion that adopts the small group pattern, Protestant churches and Yiguan Dao also depend on the development and multiplication of small groups.

Concluding Comments

The rise of China is not only in the economic sphere but also in the religious realm. While the former has been fully probed by students and reported by the mass media, the latter has been neglected to a large degree. The web of causation of religious growth in contemporary China is complex, and any analysis on this topic is bound to be partial, but we still try to emphasize three factors that are probed by the five articles included in this issue. First, the improved religious freedom permits religion to develop in a broader space. Although the religious policies are still restrictive, in practice officials are selective in the policy implementation. More important, many Chinese people are willing to accept any religion, and few religions encounter strong social hostility in China. Second, social anomie, caused by the rapid social transition, enhances people’s religious demand. Finally, religious groups’ strategies can successfully avoid state regulation and efficiently recruit new followers. We must acknowledge that there are more factors leading to the religious growth than the above-mentioned factors, and more research will be needed in the future.

In selecting the pieces included in this issue, we chose articles that represent sociological or anthropological concerns. All the authors have tremendous ethnographic experiences that allow them to exhibit the complexity of religious trends. More than that, they inform us about how religions shape and are being shaped by

the surrounding society. Due to the limit of space and paper submissions, we failed to select articles on Islam and Confucianism, although they are of great importance in China. We hope our future work can make up for this lack.

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